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ABSTRACT

Historically, community colleges have sought to serve the needs of and expand opportunities for the nation's veterans. Some attributes that make community colleges user-friendly for veterans are low tuition; alternative delivery systems, such as telecommunications and other forms of distance learning; occupational courses linked to the immediate demands of local employers; and work-based learning programs that give veterans the opportunity to employ skills they acquired in the service. One institution which strives to serve veterans is San Antonio Community College (SACC), in Texas, where 1,533 veterans enrolled in fall 1995. At SACC veterans receive such customized services as focused outreach and recruitment, veterans counseling, and computer-assisted instruction. Another model college is California's Palomar College which provides access to a full-time Veterans Supervisor and Guidance Tech, as well as nine part-time veteran assistants. The college also participates in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), a workshop held once a week to provide veterans with information on application policies and procedures for collecting benefits for postsecondary education. However, only 40% or less of benefits available to veterans are currently utilized. To increase this figure postsecondary institutions must recognize the skills of former members of the military and integrate these experiences into programs and establish a national network of information about institutional and state policies toward veterans. Also, serious consideration should be given to increasing the basic level of benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill. (TGI)

AACC

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

ED 388 336

Statement

to the

U. S. House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Education, Training, Employment and Housing

on Veterans' Affairs

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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November 16, 1995

by

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Dr. David Pierce and I am president of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). I am also a Marine who has served in Korea, and this makes me doubly pleased to appear before you this morning. As you know, the AACC represents roughly 1,100 regionally accredited, associate degree-granting colleges of higher education. Our association has been an active supporter of the Montgomery GI Bill and all its antecedents. Historically, community colleges have gone the extra mile to accommodate the particular needs of veterans.

Today I would like to speak to three key areas: why community colleges believe it is important that veterans be served well by our institutions; what some of our colleges are doing now to meet veterans' needs; and what further can be done to expand opportunities for those who have served our country.

Our nation's veterans represent a pool of highly talented individuals who can greatly benefit our economy and society through further education and training in a postsecondary setting. With astonishing rapidity, postsecondary education is becoming a necessary prerequisite for generating a satisfying standard of living. The disparity in earnings between individuals with a college degree and those with only a high school diploma is large and constantly widening. This situation reflects the economy's movement from one in which mass production served as the primary engine, into one in which technology drives economic well-being. Community colleges can provide the critical link for separated members of the Armed Forces to receive the training they need to become successfully integrated into the civilian economy. For the most part,

veterans are well-prepared to take advantage of community college programs. They usually have a solid secondary school foundation, have acquired valuable skills and aptitudes while in service, and have developed strong habits of discipline. Like many community college enrollees they tend to be older than traditionally aged college students (the mean age of a community college student is now close to 30), and very focused on how they will use the education or training they receive.

Many attributes of community colleges make them user-friendly for veterans, which is why their enrollments at these institutions has been increasing. For starters, community colleges strive to keep their tuitions at a level that makes them easily affordable. Averages can be deceiving, but the current annual figure for tuition, fees, books, and supplies for full-time students at two-year public institutions is still under $2,000--a tremendous bargain. This means that Chapter 30 Montgomery GI Bill benefits are currently capable of covering the full cost of a community college education at virtually all our colleges. I must note parenthetically that we are extremely concerned about the potential for reductions in these benefits. Veterans are also attracted by the time and cost savings available through alternative delivery systems such as telecommunications and other forms of distance learning. These non-traditional modes of instruction help many students juggle the demands of work and college attendance. Another attraction for veterans is community colleges' integration of occupational education courses with the immediate demands of local employers. Also, the frequent availability of work-based learning programs gives veterans the opportunity to employ the skills they acquired during service while simultaneously accomplishing their

educational goals.

Let me give you a few examples of how our colleges serve the specific needs of veterans. **San Antonio Community College** (SACC) enrolled 1,533 veterans in the fall of 1995. At SACC, veterans receive a comprehensive system of support services, many of which were formerly funded by the Department of Education's Veterans Education Outreach Program, now discontinued. These programs are particularly important for veterans in challenging circumstances, such as those who are disabled or educationally disadvantaged. Some of the services provided include: focused outreach and recruiting in order to stimulate veteran interest; academic support, such as peer tutoring and small group tutoring, and computer-assisted instruction; veterans counseling, guidance and related support services for personal as well as academic difficulties; and linkages to community-based agencies. More traditional services are also available, including course placement advice, advance pay processing, career-related guidance, job placement services, and counseling on rehabilitation and readjustment. Activities such as these have helped SACC gain the largest enrollment of veterans in the state of Texas.

Palomar College in San Marcos, CA, also provides veterans with an array of customized services. Veterans have access to a full-time Veterans Supervisor and Guidance Tech, and nine part-time veteran assistants. The Veterans' Services Office offers an Outreach Program at Camp Pendleton Marine Base. In partnership with MiraCosta College, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is given once a week to 40 to 150 service personnel and dependents. These participants are usually within a few

weeks or months from separation from service. The TAP provides information on VA application policies and procedures for collecting benefits at a university, college, and/or training institution, and related information about attendance at a postsecondary institution. More than 570 veterans apply for school each semester, and the number has doubled in the last year as a result of the downsizing of the military force.

On campus, Palomar College provides veterans with an orientation program that outlines VA policies and procedures, as well as college policies; provides assistance on application processes and testing; and helps develop education plans for matriculation. A comprehensive assessment of a former serviceperson's record, transcripts and military training is provided by a full-time evaluator on campus who monitors veteran registrations, adds, and drops. The Veterans' Services Office reports weekly in an electronic format to the VA through the VA Certs Program.

Two years ago, Palomar College was asked to pilot the VA Certs Program. As part of this project, the institution's Veterans' Services Office Supervisor presented the program and its benefits to schools in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas. Partly because of this, California has one of the highest VA Certs Program user rates in the nation, resulting in improved service to veterans and significant cost savings for the VA.

However, much more can and should be done to promote increased utilization by veterans of their Chapter 30 benefits. The current utilization rate of these benefits is under 40 percent, a disturbingly low figure. Some activities can be undertaken

privately, while others need to be initiated by the federal government.

First, postsecondary institutions should strive to formally recognize the skills that separated members of the military have gained during their service. "Work-based learning" is very real. For example, it is a key component of the fledgling School-to-Work Opportunities Act. The promise of gaining specific skills draws many people into the military. Nevertheless, it is a real challenge for academic institutions to integrate and incorporate the disparate and less-structured learning experiences of ex-servicemen into their programs. Parallel cooperation will be needed from accrediting bodies and state licensing boards. But if more ex-military personnel are to be encouraged to pursue postsecondary education, these types of integration of nontraditional learning experiences into formal academic programs will be necessary. In this area, community colleges can achieve more.

Also, we recommend establishment of some type of national network in which information about institutional and state policies toward veterans could be shared. The advantage of this system is obvious: it would facilitate the use of benefits by veterans, and help to meet local economic needs. Additionally, it would also likely stimulate institutions to be more accommodating to the unique characteristics of veterans. The system could also have the side effect of providing greater integration of related programs targeted to veterans. A system of this nature would not be unlike the "One-Stop Career Centers" envisioned in pending workforce consolidation legislation. But its focus would be on the unique capabilities and needs of veterans.

There are other policies relating to the provision of benefits for veterans that

should be considered. First and most importantly, serious consideration needs to be given to increasing the basic level of benefits under the GI Bill. Despite the low tuitions of community colleges, living expenses remain high, and these can discourage people from pursuing needed education Also, because VA benefits are earned, these should not be counted as "student aid" in the calculation of eligibility for federal Title IV student aid. Furthermore, the GI Bill benefit eligibility needs to reflect the reality that many veterans need to undergo remedial education before starting in a higher education program. We cannot make the problem of poor high school educations disappear by pretending that it does not exist.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you and would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.